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Elliott State Forest parcel to be sold to Seneca Jones, drawing environmental lawsuit

Gallery: Elliott State Forest



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This story has been updated.

The Oregon Department of State Lands has struck a deal to sell a 788-acre parcel of the Elliott State Forest near Coos Bay to the Seneca Jones Timber Co. for \$1.8 million.

The timber company's owner, Kathy Jones, **had said the company pursued the land**, which it intends to clear cut parts of, to provoke a fight with environmental groups.

It certainly worked: Three environmental groups filed suit Monday to block the purchase and simultaneously sought a temporary injunction to prevent the sale of part of the 93,000-acre state forest.

Two other parcels in the Elliott are also being sold to a timber company, **a development announced Monday** by the Department of State Lands. The Scott Timber Co. was the winning bidder on two other parcels in the state forest being sold, the agency said, with a \$787,000 bid on 355 acres called Benson Ridge and a \$1.8 million bid on a 310-acre slice of Adams Ridge.

The groups -- Cascadia Wildlands, Audubon Society of Portland and the Center for Biological Diversity -- **said in legal filings** that the sale was expressly prohibited by law and that the land shouldn't be logged in order to protect the marbled murrelet, a threatened seabird that nests in coastal forests.

"The state has illegally clearcut the Elliott for decades, and now that it has been forced to stop, it is engaging in an illegal selloff," said Bob Sallinger, Audubon's conservation director. "It is time for the state to look for real solutions that protect the Elliott and address the needs of the Common School Fund."

Like the spotted owl before it, the murrelet has become a cornerstone species for environmental groups seeking to curtail logging in Oregon. The bird's population in Washington, Oregon and California has steadily declined over the last decade.

The State Land Board oversees some 700,000 acres statewide and has a constitutional responsibility to maximize revenue from the land to fund K-12 education. But because **logging was halted** in the 93,000-acre Elliott State Forest by environmental lawsuits, land management there will cost the state about \$3 million this year.

The land sale would fill that gap for just a year, raising questions about the state forest's future. State officials have said they consider the sale as a test case to determine the forest's value for larger sales or land swaps.

The sale has had hiccups.

Parcels saw their value drop after state and volunteer biologists discovered murrelets nesting there during summer surveys. Timber once worth an estimated \$22.1 million dropped to \$3.6 million, according to state appraisals. Stands occupied by the small seabird can't be logged and aren't worth as much.

While worth less on paper, a state contractor's appraisal theorized the reduced value may allow small timber companies **to buy the land cheap** and log it anyway, skirting laws to reap the original, higher value.

We'll update this story as we learn more.

-- Rob Davis

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